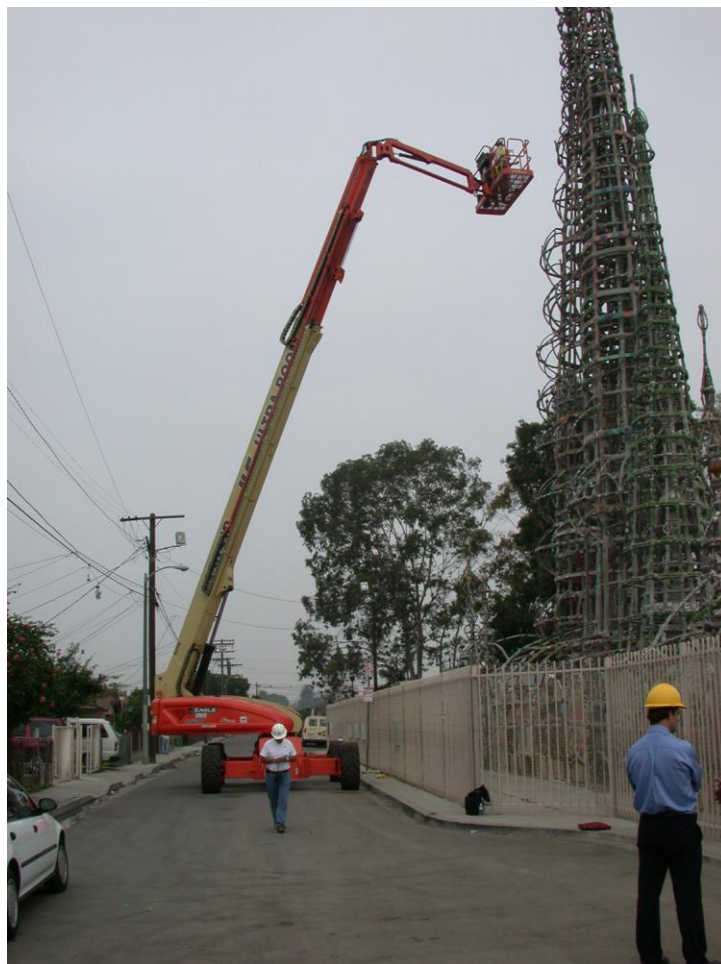


**Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (The Watts Towers)
Four Decades of Interventions and Still Searching for a Solution**

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Abstract

Simon Rodia built the Towers single handedly in the period from 1921 to 1954 without the aid of scaffolding. They are constructed from steel pipes, rods, channels, and bars, tied together with steel wires and covered in steel mesh. He then covered the structure with a cement mortar. The tallest of the 16 structures reaches a height of 30 m (99.5 feet). He decorated the towers and the other structures with fragments of porcelain, bottle glass, ceramic tiles, glass, stones, seashells, and a variety of other materials by embedding them in the still wet cement.

Rodia left Watts in 1955 and deeded his property to a neighbor. In 1959 the City of Los Angeles issued a demolition order since the Towers were deemed structurally unsafe.

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Subsequently the city agreed to a load test designed to determine the structural stability of the Towers. One of the Towers was subjected to a load of close to 10,000 pounds and the deflection was measured. As a result of this test the Towers were deemed safe and the demolition order was withdrawn.

The Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (CSRTW) acquired the Towers and was responsible for their maintenance until 1975. In 1975 the CSRTW deeded the Towers to the City of Los Angeles, which in turn deeded the Towers to the State of California in 1978. Under an agreement between the City and the State the Department for Cultural Affairs of the City of Los Angeles continued the operation and maintenance of the site and its monuments. In 1990 the Towers were registered as a National Historic Landmark.

The Towers showed signs of deterioration early on and Rodia himself undertook repairs while he was building them. Cracking of the cement cover and detachment and loss of decorative elements are the most visible signs of deterioration. Over the past four decades the Towers have been subjected a number of times to major restoration efforts. These interventions were not without controversy and one major intervention by the State was actually stopped by a court order. The last major interventions occurred after the Northridge earthquake in 1994 and a major rainstorm in 2008.

A thorough review of the condition of the Towers by an engineering firm in 1983 resulted in the first version of a "Conservation Handbook". The handbook prescribed a variety of interventions, aimed at repairing damage and slowing deterioration. While the handbook underwent a number of revisions, most of the interventions since adhered to the original version. Another review by a preservation firm in 2005/06 did not suggest major changes to the established procedures.

Severe criticism of the current practices by the CSRTW, community members and others continued and in 2010 the City of Los Angeles approached the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) for assistance in the preservation of the Towers. At the end of 2010 the City and LACMA signed a one year contract which assigns to LACMA the responsibility for the day to day maintenance and minor repairs of the site and its monuments, and the task to review the Conservation Handbook and suggest improved approaches to the long term preservation effort.

A review of the treatment documentation and an evaluation of the successes/failures of past treatments are currently under way. A comprehensive monitoring and inspection program is expected to give further insight into the different mechanisms causing the cracking and loss of ornamentation. First indications are that cracking seems to re-occur in the same locations, suggesting that the methodology/materials used for crack repairs have to be re-evaluated. Re-attachments of ornaments with adhesives such as cellulose nitrate and B72 seem to show consistent failure.

This paper will report on the findings of the first year and discuss potential improvements to the ongoing preservation effort.